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For Cheryl: The Long And The Short Of It

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*For Cheryl:
The Long And The Short Of It*

by
Rachel Lebo

A thesis presented to the
Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts
Washington University in St. Louis

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

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ABSTRACT

Short stories are an indirect way of creating a truth by showing instead of telling. They are a way to observe and communicate a single idea. A short story for me is a vehicle for hiding my truth behind a character, exploring myself in the safety of an identity that is not my own. When I read *Chunky in Heat*, author A.M. Homes and I hide together behind her character, Cheryl, and find solidarity.

The following writings, paintings, and sculptures are collaborations between myself and the women of short story fiction. Those women being the authors, the subjects, and the readers. Each character provides a different understanding of myself and my work. These characters are helping me to collaborate alongside the many real women with whom I can identify in an effort to put a name to an idea that remains heavily undefined.

I cannot tell you what this undefined Thing is. I can only show you, using short stories as way to indirectly tell the truth.

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CHERYL

I am Rachel. But let's be Cheryl.

Cheryl lays on the chair in the center of the backyard, her right hand plucking individual blades of grass, her eyes not focused but aimed at a bald spot of lawn, a remnant from another afternoon when she had a similar problem.¹

Today I went out to my backyard and laid on my k-mart chair, that I got on sale for \$14.99 after 4th of July last year, not the color I would prefer, but a construction site orange (that's what you get for shopping sale). The heat slows time and I stew in my body, laying very still, hoping I can soak up something new and improved while I'm not paying –

My skin does a curious thing, able to move about in any which way it, and gravity, wishes, but within a limitation, like a dog running around (or rather rolling lazily about) on a chain. I smush skin against the strip of the lawn chair, seeing how far it will spread. It's fascinating, and repulsive, which makes it more fascinating, until I have to stop.

Concentrate! I want to replay the moment when ()

A ladybug lands near my knee, and I fight the instinct to swipe it away, because I want to see how long I can stand a foreign independent critter having free rein



Untitled, 2017
Oil on Canvas
16" x 20"
From the artist

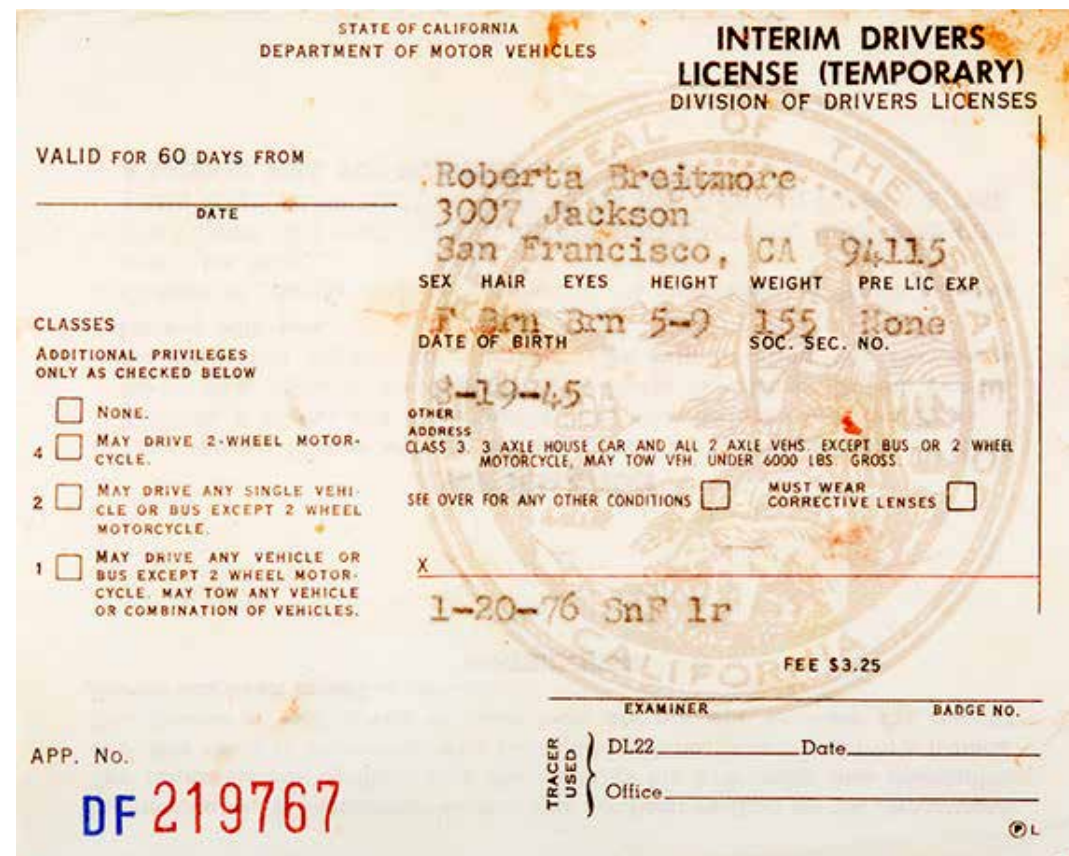


Untitled, 2018
Woodcut
8" x 10"
From the artist

over my nerve endings. It turns out that that is about 7 seconds. When I move to swat at the sensation of tiny legs, I become aware –

Trampolines, that is what a small girl I once babysat called my boobs as she lay on top of me and pressed down hard on them. The trampolines are there, but sort of pointlessly, they fall left and right, too lazy to give a fuck. They aren't trampolines at all.

She stands up, peeling herself off the lawn chair with a long sucking sound, and walks toward the house. As she walks, her legs slip past each other with the same whooshing sound that corduroy makes.²



Roberta's Interim Drivers License, issued January 20, 1976
 Lynn Hershman Leeson
 From the artist's website

This is one of the documents that Leeson collected during the time that she spent in San Francisco as her invented character, Roberta.

Cheryl's Introduction

Recently someone asked me if there was something that I didn't want to say about my paintings, suggesting that there was one *Thing* that drove my work, and that I may be avoiding it, or keeping it hidden. I reflected on the moment for a while afterwards and thought, "not any more has happened to me than any other woman." How can I put a finger on the *Thing* when it isn't one moment or one action? It is a temperature. A color. It exists openly and broadly and is mostly sensed when put in contrast to another way. Its lack of presentness is what allows it to eat and grow and remain unconsidered yet massive and vital. Like gravity, it has an affect that we understand, only through our bodies, rarely ever naming it.

The best way to begin to define this *Thing* is to tell you what it isn't.

It isn't a microaggression.

*Microaggression: everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or messages that target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership.*³

A microaggression suggests a person to person relationship of conscious or unconscious behaviors that affect how one thinks of themselves or how they are perceived by others. It is a way of making a person or persons become and stay othered. Microaggressions are more than that, but I stop here. What I speak of is not something created person to person.



Untitled, 2015
Oil on canvas
3'x 4'
From the artist

My early and instinctual response to what I now know to be the *Thing*.

It isn't a 't' trauma.

't' trauma: Small 't' traumas are events that exceed our capacity to cope and cause a disruption in emotional functioning. These distressing events are not inherently life or bodily-integrity threatening, but perhaps better described as ego-threatening due to the individual left feeling notable helplessness. Examples include, infidelity, divorce, abrupt relocation, planning a wedding, starting a new job, legal trouble, and financial worries.⁴

What psychologists call a 't' trauma, a trauma that isn't capital 'T' (something catastrophic to the body and mind; for example, war), is a smaller and more 'everyday' trauma that isn't physical, but still carries a physiological resonance. This is not what I propose either, because these traumas suggest an aftermath of one event.

This is a resonance that remains in a vacuum, never fading, so long as we exist. It never happens, it is always happening. But still I can't find it.

Rachel reads Cheryl and becomes her. Rachel puts Cheryl on and uses her skin to explore. Through Cheryl she can begin to put herself at arm's length and examine what is too hard to see when inside. Perhaps with her paintings, Rachel is using something outside of herself, in order to understand and face the undefined. It needs a name, but to name it is to put a finger on the wrong thing. Maybe later.

Rachel now reads Woman. So, she becomes Woman.



Untitled, 2018
Woodcut
10" x 8"
From the artist

WOMAN

*"What's that?" he asks.
"Oh, this?" I touch the ribbon at the back of my neck. "It's just
my ribbon." I run my fingers halfway around its green and glossy
length, and bring them to rest on the tight bow that sits in the front.
He reaches out his hand, and I seize it and press it away.
"You shouldn't touch it," I say. "You can't touch it"⁵*

You like me because I'm considered *pretty*.

Pretty, pretty, pretty, pretty, pretty.

You like me because being with *pretty* makes you think you might get *prettier*.

You want to say that *pretty* is yours.

You like *pretty* because you hate yourself, not because you like me.

Why would you like me? I'm *nasty*.

You unwrap all that *pretty* you like so much,

And you just might have to encounter the *sour*.

But you are still just a child, and that *nasty* scares you.

You don't want to know my *sour*.

The only thing you care to know is the thing I won't let you have.

Because in your world there is nothing you can't have.

It's not your fault that you were born into a different world than mine.

Your world is dark.

My world is luscious, lively, lit, and located far from yours.

Having *pretty* will not make you *prettier*.

You can't have *pretty*.

You have to earn *pretty*.

"A wife" he says, "should have no secrets from her husband."

"I don't have any secrets," I tell him.

"The ribbon."

"The ribbon is not a secret; it is just mine."⁶



Frame, 2013
Chelsea Knight
Mixed Media Installation, Single-Channel Video, and C-Prints
From the artist's website

Knight asks female and male construction workers to read feminist texts while building a room together. The piece is both collaborative and alive. This is a photograph of the room during construction.

Woman on Process

They come to the house awkwardly, not sure of what to expect in becoming me and others. Rachel has paired Sarah with me, and it makes me nervous. Not because of Sarah in particular, I hear she reads a lot of fairy tales and can hold her liquor, both things I enjoy. I am worried I will be misunderstood or worse, generalized.

The women trickle in throughout the evening. As each one walks through the door, I hold my breath, making a judgement as to whether or not she is Sarah. The first two are not. They have shoulders that have yet to see the weight of what I know.

Around 7:45pm Sarah comes in. At first, I am unsure. She is wearing rather non-descript clothes and carries herself with purpose. Then I see it, the bright red ribbon around her ankle, peeking out from the bottom of her pants. I know she will understand.

After a riotous conversation about how their arteries have turned to cheddar following last night's dinner of mac and cheese, Sarah and Rachel begin to talk about me. Rachel lists my traits: self-aware (I beg to differ), curious (I suppose), and story teller (I am fictional...). They work together to place Sarah's body structurally in the space. Rachel believes that while there is a standard size to all houses and furniture, each individual curates their space to their body. This intimate relationship is what Rachel looks for. In the case of an Airbnb,



Wanna watch Finding Nemo?, 2016
Oil on canvas
3'x 4'
From the artist

the fictional character, myself, takes the lead in how Sarah's body should fit. There is an awkwardness as Rachel starts to photograph Sarah in the bedroom space, a place in the Airbnb that we would have both occupied. It is the kind of awkwardness that comes with being photographed and with being in a bed. The ribbon is always made visible, the intended focus of the pictures. In reality, I like to keep my ribbon to myself, but I also understand why it is important that it be seen by other women. As I watch the two interact, I don't see Rachel's ribbon, but I know it is there. Otherwise she would have never picked me.

CONNIE



Untitled, 2018
Woodcut
8''x 10''
From the artist

Version one:

I was walking, cutting across the parking lot, and a man crossed my path. I looked up, and my eyes met a taunting smile. He just kept looking at me, clearly entertained. As our paths joined, I had the familiar dilemma: do I continue to walk next to this guy? Or do I create a distance, giving him the satisfaction of knowing he has affected me? I decided to move to the sidewalk... where I would have ended up anyway, but this pleased him. He loved the idea that I was bothered. He didn't follow me or try to physically make any threatening moves, but he purposefully stayed in my eyesight smiling and watching me. While he wasn't being physically overpowering, he knew that he could look at me any patronizing and filthy way he wanted to and there is nothing I could do about it. And there was nothing that I could do about it. So, I just looked ahead and kept walking. He reached his car, which could have concluded this power trip jerk off, but I knew better. I knew, because this isn't new news. I knew, even though I wasn't watching him, that he was going to use the final chance he had when passing me in his car, to finish off. Sure enough, as I made it to the stoplight and waited to cross the street, a truck pulled up next to me. I had music in my ears and my eyes forward, so the abuse was how it usually is, right in the corner of your vision. You know it is there, but it is never in focus. It isn't until later when I really reflect on what shit it is.

Version two:

Yesterday I was walking through the parking lot headed back to the studio and I crossed paths with this dude man thing. It leered at me, exercising its right to stare. Licking its lips and chomping its teeth, the thing became hot and excited. The dude man thing began to dance around me in circles, cackling and gyrating. As I moved away from the horrid creature, it took off running towards its truck. The dude man thing hopped inside and revved the engine as it stuck its upper body out the window, hooting and calling. Through the windshield I could see the wild look in its eyes as it reversed out of the parking spot. The dude man thing aimed the grill right at me, put the truck in gear and gunned it.



Figure 1
I've forgotten the rest of the story., 2017
Oil on Canvas
23" x 27"
From the artist

Connie on *Un-ness*

There is an aspect of something unfinished to all of Rachel's work. Something unfulfilled, unseen, unattainable, unsatisfied, unpolished, and unwritten. Un- is a prefix meaning "not" and works well when defining something by what it isn't versus placing a finger on what exactly it is. Let's refer to it as *Un-ness*.

The *Un-ness* starts where Rachel starts, in the paintings. Parts of the painting are given the focus. In, *I've forgotten the rest of the story.* (fig.1), the basket in the bottom right corner is the sharpest, followed by the molding of the window, and then everything else behind them. The silhouette of the body becomes clear later, weaving in and out of foreground and background. Towards the top, the walls begin to unravel, blurring the sense of the ceiling. Those walls allow you to see through to the exterior that is just a plain of color. This tells you about the unrealness of the space. Throughout, *I've forgotten the rest of the story.* (fig.1), you can see traces of orange that evidence the building thus far and leave open the possibility of more to come.

In all of these paintings, the body is in various states of *Un-ness*. Mainly unfinished as it never quite completes the process of becoming. This relationship is not about a body disappearing into a space or being depersoned. This relationship is about an interconnected existence. Gaston Bachelard's, *The Poetics of Space*, talks about a mollusk's relationship to its shell.⁷ The mollusk exists to create her protective shell. She does not build it and then continue to use it thereafter. The mollusk is always producing and caring for her shell. Without her



'Tis but a scratch' 'A scratch?! Your arm's off!'
'No, it isn't', 2012
Nicole Eisenman
From House of Voltaire

Eisenman created plaster bodies that were both becoming and deteriorating, but either way, tied directly to the building and its materials.

shell she would not be a mollusk, and the shell could not be without her. She will never be complete. She will forever be in a state of *Un-ness*. This is the state of the bodies in the paintings. They are always being formed, the architecture their shell.

The archway is possibly the best example of *Un-ness*. It is something that is defined by what it isn't. It doesn't physically exist, it starts in all the places that the wall and the floor end. Instead of saying where it is, it is best defined by where it is not.

There is an *Un-ness* in the exercise of naming the *Thing*. The *Thing* that cannot be pinpointed as one occurrence. The *Thing* is not past tense, it is not over, it is *Un*.



Untitled, 2017
Oil on Canvas
16" x 20"
From the artist



Saturate, 2017
Installation
10' x 10' x 10'
From the artist

MARY

(age 8)

Hours later, stiff with cold, she stood up. Even had he remained all day at the window he could never have sighted her through the heavy mist. She knew this, but she could never climb the steps to fetch him; that was impossible.⁸

Down, below the long stone steps I become distracted from my men. Usually around this time of day, I would be deep into an invasion of another fort, plotting all of the best moves, sneaking deep into the jungle and waiting for the perfect moment to jump out and surprise the enemy. Yesterday, I led the troops through basic training, making sure that they were all fit to fight, checking their stamina and strength. I was firm and rational, so all of my new men learned to love and respect me, vowing to die for my cause.

Today I am just in a clay pit, it's drizzling, and my toes are starting to feel funny and buzzy. I know my troops are close, but I can't see them, not really. I try to make my afternoon announcements, but I glance up the hill, at the stone house, and they disappear.

The boy from yesterday said he would show me the gravel he keeps in a box, collected from his driveway, but it is raining, and he hasn't come outside.

I mustn't lose track of my duties! I hurry to stand at the high point of the army



Untitled, 2017
Oil on Canvas
20" x 16"
From the artist

base and look down at my gathering troops. All of their faces hardened by the things that they have seen, looking up at me, waiting for their orders.

“Men! You have fought hard for me, and your courage has been commendable.” I pause, the boy’s funny tan hair popping into my mind,

“We can’t climb those stone steps up there.” She was shouting and pointing at the house. “No outfit can, no outfit ever will...” She was desperate. “It’s not for outfits. It’s a flight of steps that’s not for outfits...because it’s... because...””



Figure 2
To inhabit a shell we must be alone, 2018
Oil on Canvas
36''x 48''
From the artist

Mary on the Archway

There are two areas in the house that try to talk to me. They keep looking at me, studying me, waiting. They are twins, these areas. It makes me uneasy how they curve over me, imposing.

The corners in the house don't speak to me or cause a ruckus; the corners do what they were meant to do. Corners stay still and proper, holding the house up straight and strong. They are good corners. The ceiling is well behaved as well. It lays flat and keeps whatever is above, out. It lets me be, doesn't ask any questions, and usually stays out of my view. Even the windows are orderly and practical. They keep wind out, let the sun in, and look lovely while they do it. Why can't these odd contours follow suit? As a pair, they are bullying, although I can't tell if this is directed towards me or each other. Maybe it's their organic resonance that unsettles me. As if they have a say that could override mine. They are a threat to my ownership over this home.

I decide to start staring back at these stubborn arches, asserting my dominance. I stare, and I stare and then I stare some more. Eventually the left archway begins to warp, becoming shorter and distorted. To my horror, I realize that it is beginning to fall down, and with it comes the wall. I run to the arch and frantically try to hold it up. For if it falls, the wall will fall, and my home will be laid flat. As I hold the arch I look desperately around for a way to keep the wall up. But I am alone in this house. I see a chair in the corner, that perhaps could wedge the wall. As I move to grab the chair, the whole wall, now completely loose from its roots, begins to quickly shift weight towards the floor. I stand back up in the archway,

arms stretched around either side of the wall, holding it up. I don't dare move an inch, for fear of upsetting the delicate balance that my embrace creates.

Much later, arms leaden and numb, I realize that here I must remain.



House, 1993
 Rachel Whiteread
 From Richard Baker / In Pictures via Getty Images.

Whiteread uses the negative space to redefine a thing.



Figure 3
Untitled, 2018
 Oil on Canvas
 20" x 30"
 From the artist

Also Mary on the Archway

Archways are open and accessible. Homes with arches typically have more than one that allows access into a common space. This sort of openness promotes interaction between people within the home, whether it be children, parents, or employees. This is opposite to doors that increase privacy and keep out interactions. In the 1930's, houses were built with singular paths to destinations within, so that the only way to see another person, was if you intended to.

Alexander Klein (1920's German architect) considered the interaction of people in domestic space to be "friction" and that by creating terminal rooms you could keep a delicate balance in family life that was "...always on the edge of malfunction"¹⁰. Many houses in the United States are built around the idea that "intimacy is a form of violence" and that "relationships are forms of bondage".

Robin Evans asks, "which became more private first, the room or the soul?"¹¹. Did we build these terminal rooms with doors because we want to be solitary and safe, or did the building of these types of spaces pull us apart from each other? The archway represents community and solace. Its function is less an exit from a space and more a hopeful opening, seeking contact.

The reoccurring archway in Rachel's paintings is evidence of a motif. Her process involves placing bodies around a space and working to find their structural, architectural, and compositional role in the house. Because of the weight and preconceived notions that a body carries, especially in a domestic space, it becomes a challenge to excavate that body from its burdens and give it autonomy again. Rachel isn't sure that this is even possible, but she finds the exercise meaningful and enlightening. The common pitfalls being that she makes the



Figure 4
Dripping fat onto the lawn, 2018
Vintage corduroy over wood
7'x6'x2'
From the artist

bodies into furniture or sexualizes them in any way. This is where the archway presented itself as an opportunity. In *Untitled* (fig.3) a body stiffly wraps around an arch, confusing the relationship of support. Is the arch supporting the body or is the body holding up those walls from which the arch is carved? Through this action, the archway has morphed from a hopeful opening to a destination on its threshold.

Looking to another example in *To inhabit a shell we must be alone* (fig.2), the archways have evolved into a larger interdependent system. They become figures themselves. The character of the arch, the way it leans down towards the body, wanting to compromise, is what makes it a bridge for Rachel between the body and architecture. This particular painting stages the two arches in conversation and as subject. A leg wraps around Left Arch, the rest of the figure hidden. This shift in focus from the presence of a clear and full body, gives the leading role to the arches, allowing their relationship to play in the foreground. The window, seen through Right Arch, provides even more character. It is framed by Right Arch but also a part of Right Arch. By giving the arches personality they are once again moved away from a thing to be used and transformed into bodies themselves.

In order to explore the archway as a destination and a body, Rachel creates it three dimensionally, building it into realer space (an illusion that has left two dimensions, but is still false). As an architectural object, an archway is meant to serve the purpose of passage from room to room. It cannot be closed off and is only filled when a body passes through it. With *Dripping Fat onto the Lawn*



I'm going to scream in the wind, 1999
 Regina Jose Galindo
 Performance hanging in an Arch in Guatemala City
 From the artist's website

Galindo reads poetry in the wind where no one will hear her, while hanging from a public arch. She is pursuing a hopeless task because she must.

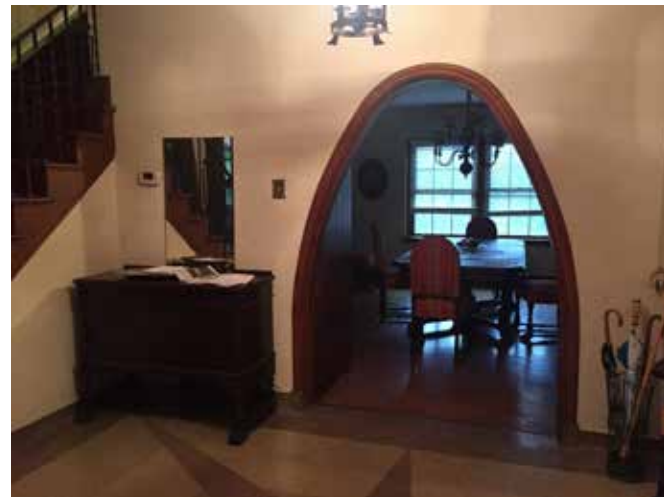


Figure 5
Mollusk is still in progress, so this is an image of the arch that *Mollusk* is modeled after.

(fig.4), Rachel has created the interior space of an arch that belongs to a local home in St. Louis. By giving the emptiness that lies within an arch solid form, she makes it a destination and turns its threshold into something physically tangible. She populates it with all of the bodies that have stood under its curve, sewing their corduroy skin together, hands touching backs. The silhouetted shapes connect on all sides, becoming one, only finding ends on the ground from which they appear to grow. In Rachel's most recent iteration of the arch, *Mollusk* (fig.5), she steps away from the idea of the arch as a body and explores the importance of the arch's *Un-ness* by creating it as an absence again. This absence highlighting that something can exist and cause an effect whether or not it can be seen or touched.

This *Thing* that Rachel tries to define is like the archway. Despite their lack of physicality, archways continue to function and influence a space. Neither one can be concretely grasped but are still present and real. There is an archway in all of our homes. It is a part of the structure, built into the bones. The only way to truly change that arch is to burn the house down.

LAUREL



Untitled, 2019
Oil on Canvas
6''x 6''
From the artist

Daphne hardly ever spoke, but when she did, her voice was petite and tinkly, the voice one might expect from a shiny new earring.¹²

Last week she got the prize for the best poem, from my favorite teacher, Mr. Coleson. I think he might have missed my poem or lost it somewhere, because I spent days working on it and I didn't win. Sara told me that Daphne only spent a couple of minutes on hers, so it doesn't make any sense at all.

Tomorrow I plan to go to Mr. Coleson and give him another copy of my poem, because once he reads it, he can give me the prize. After all, my poem has all the best words in it. Things about trees and oceans and love. Daphne's poem made no sense, the last lines were about raining in her heart. There is absolutely NO way that it rains inside of her body.

– maybe she doesn't know that –

I went to Mr. Coleson's desk today during lunch and gave him my poem on a new sheet of paper, no erase marks anywhere, my handwriting and everything was gold star material. I told him that I made him a brand-new copy, since he lost my first one.

“Laurel, thank you very much for the new copy, but I didn’t lose your poem, I have it right here.” Mr. Coleson opened his file drawer, reached in and pulled out an orange folder. Inside, amongst many other notebook sheets, was my original poem.

“You did a great job Laurel, I can tell that you worked very hard.”

“Then why didn’t I win the prize?” I asked, “I worked much longer on my poem than Daphne did, and she doesn’t even know that it can’t rain inside of a heart!”

“Well,” Mr. Coleson took a long pause, “a poem doesn’t have to be true... Daphne’s heart may not actually have clouds inside, but that doesn’t mean that she doesn’t feel like it’s raining.”

I looked out the window, trying to decide what to write, searching for lines, but nothing could compare with what Daphne had written, “My father, the veteran,” my favorite line of all time. It replayed itself in my head, and I gave up trying to write.¹³



Figure 6
Francesca Woodman
Providence, Rhode Island from Space2, 1976
Gelatin silver print
4.6" x 4.8"
From artnet

Laurel on Body

Body has been stretched thin. It is a word that now sounds funny in my mouth, I have said it so many times. What is the difference between body, person, figure, being, woman? Body is skin, it is function, it is a house, it is temporary, it is deeply personal. But body has become stereotypes, advertisements, controversy, inadequacies, politics, and privilege. Body has blended into identity and person. You do not exist inside of your body, you exist intertwined with it. Yourself and your being, created by it and because of it. Body has specifically become woman. A woman's identity is not formed without knowing that her body is her heaviest weight. Morgan Parker corners the idea perfectly when she says, "My body is an argument that I did not start"¹⁴.

Rachel looks at the body inside of a utopian vacuum, as the house of the soul and mind. Body does not create the person but feeds her. The relationship of the body and the person is like the mollusk and its shell. An interconnected support system. A personal place that belongs to one's self. In Rachel's paintings, she views these figures as bodies. Something that they have true ownership over. This also feeds into the idea that these are unreal spaces, and places of the mind.

Artists like Francesca Woodman and Valie Export are using body in space as well. Francesca Woodman's *Providence, Rhode Island from Space2*, 1976 (fig.6) hides a body seemingly within the wallpaper, the body losing over to the space. Valie Export's *Body Configurations* (fig.7) fits the body to public space, making her bend to meet the step. While Rachel is building a language between body and



Figure 7
Valie Export
Body Configurations, 1976
Gelatin silver print
From *domus loves*

architecture, that language is one of creating, becoming, and reclaiming, not about depersoning or subordination.

Rachel piles these bodies to make them one. She piles these bodies to bring them together in a larger support system (fig.8). These bodies, once awakened can contend with the *Thing*.



Figure 8
Body pile process shots used to create silhouettes



Untitled, 2018
Oil on Canvas
10" x 10"
From the artist

BETH

It seemed as though everyone who walked by was eating. A large, distracted businessman went by holding a half-eaten hot dog. Two girls passed, sharing cashews from a white bag. The eating added to her sense that the world was disorderly and unbeautiful.¹⁵

He hasn't shown up yet and that makes my thoughts speed up. They ping-pong back and forth between player one: hot, badass, independent, and player two: desperate, exposed, average. No one wins, the game skips –

My nose catches the smell of slow cooked meat, I think the last thing I ate was a bagel at 9:00 am. That was intentional... but silly, don't think about that.

I lean against the side of a store front, needing to feel tethered to something, so that I don't remain sitting duck in the street. I reach for my phone, but consciously stop. MUST try not to be a dependent drone. Instead, I will people watch and adjust how my arms are behaving.

He must be late, I'm sure we were clear on where to meet.

I can't be here first.

I leave.

But Beth doesn't.

At the height of her anxiety she saw him through the glass wall of the pizza stand.¹⁶



Figure 9
Luis Barragán
Casa Luis Barragán, 1948



Figure 10
Francis Bacon
Three Studies of Lucien Freud, 1969
Oil on Canvas
Each 78" x 58"
From Christie's

Beth on Color

Color can be a mainline to the nerves. In the same way that the smell of salt and vinegar chips makes you salivate, color is a fast and physical trigger to something bodily. Rachel uses color in many ways in her work. For Rachel they are about moods and atmospheres that may begin to describe the temperature of the *Thing* that she seeks to name.

Architect Luis Barragán is exact and intentional when he places color in his designs. For him these colors represent childhood memories and moments (fig.9). While Rachel's work puts the same amount of weight and significance into the hands of color, hers are not communicating specific moments in memory. Hers are attempting to communicate ideas in the hopes that they may be shared. These thick and riotous colors are also chosen in order to create fictional space. Not a dream, but a conscious place in the mind, very much awake. The way that color is used as a base, sets a tone for the entire work. Rachel lays down a current on the first layer and spends the rest of the painting hiding that current. Current, being something like conducted electricity, that flows unseen, but very much alive and physically powerful. In this way she builds secrets. This also creates great compositional moments when a window is left open, or even a door. Through them you get a glimpse at this current beneath and see that there is no exit.

These fields of color become object and subject in a way that some of Francis Bacon's prints and paintings do. *Three Studies of Lucien Freud* (fig.10) is a good example of color becoming the setting and the psychological space with which the



Figure 11
Untitled, 2019
 Oil on Canvas
 13”x 13”
 From the artist



Figure 12
“...the freshest fat...”, 2019
 Oil on Canvas
 24”x 30”
 From the artist

figure inhabits and contends. Dull yellow meets grey moss on a curved horizon and produces place. Within this framework, Bacon’s muscle-bound figures sit center stage, in contrast to the way in which Rachel’s bodies become one with that place. The becoming of their bodies playing equally with the build of the architecture.

(Francis Bacon’s images have strongly influenced Rachel since a young age... too bad no one showed her Alice Neel)

In *Untitled* (fig.11) the two shades of brown are coming together and taking over floor and wall, wood panel grunge growing like kudzu. Grungy basements then lead to funny clips of grungy basement activities. These browns meet a velvety vomit green chair, that screams 70’s and reminds you why it’s in the basement in the first place. Different from this use of color is “...*the freshest fat...*” (fig.12) with large seafoam walls that would never be found in any suburban American home. A seafoam that screams the tackiness of a beach house, unicorns and children’s toys. Cloaked over the golden current that is the foundation, the seafoam changes and becomes a working relationship. The golden current is coming forward through the table, the window behind the blinds, and the hair of the figure, joining the foreground. It also comes through differently on the upper wall, eating the seafoam like a stain. This relationship between just two colors vibrates in the work, creating a simple sense of an unreal space.

These large swatches of color are in conversation with color field painters like Helen Frankenthaler, where the illustrative is left behind for deep color. Rachel’s



Figure 13
Untitled, 2018
Oil on Canvas
20''x 16''
From the artist

paintings are a mixture of narrative moments that then butt up against large weights of paint. For example, *Untitled* (fig.13) is two thirds grey green wall, that extends undefined and one third narrative, built from a figure, a window, and the stairs. This meeting of the two makes it a space of the mind, a reflection of an interior.

ALFRIDA'S OBSERVER



Untitled, 2019
Oil on Canvas
10" x 15"
From the artist

My father would always remark on how much she could eat and remain thin. Or he turned truth on its head by noting that her appetite was as picky as ever, but she still hadn't been prevented from larding on the fat. (It was not considered out of place in our family to comment about fatness or skinniness or pallor or ruddiness or baldness.)¹⁷

In fact, that seemed to be the contest at any family reunion. Who was thinnest? Who was getting fat and therefore sad? Which woman could take the smallest portion of food at the table?

Of course, this meant that she won.

The men are also held accountable for their waists, but in a different way. They never have the same air of desperation and deep pleading purpose. On the surface everyone is shamed equally for indulging. Underneath you see that for the men the shame lies in vanity, but for the women it is rooted in fear. Fear of failure, fear of isolation, and fear of losing control.

With food, the shame is at the surface, but in my family, there are other shames lurking deeper. For example, my cousin Nick graduated from college last year and is now looking for a job. Every time I see him the panic in his eyes has grown.

He prays that he finds a job before his rank in the chain of cousins drops. And trust me, there is a rank. Another example of the deeper shame surfaces quickly whenever Fox News comes on. Because we are family and because we love each other, we do not want to face our largest differences. The parts of ourselves that make us undeniably different from one another.

The only person who seems to float above the mind games and shaming, is Alfrida. She is gregarious and open, always smiles and charm. She never even seems to register on the same wave length as the rest of the family and therefore remains exempt from it. When Alfrida is talking to you, it pulls you up from the lower levels. It removes you from your rank and your politics and turns you back into a person. Not only a person, but a wonderful special person with important opinions and intelligent insight. If only she could travel around everywhere with me, the Jiminy Cricket on my shoulder.

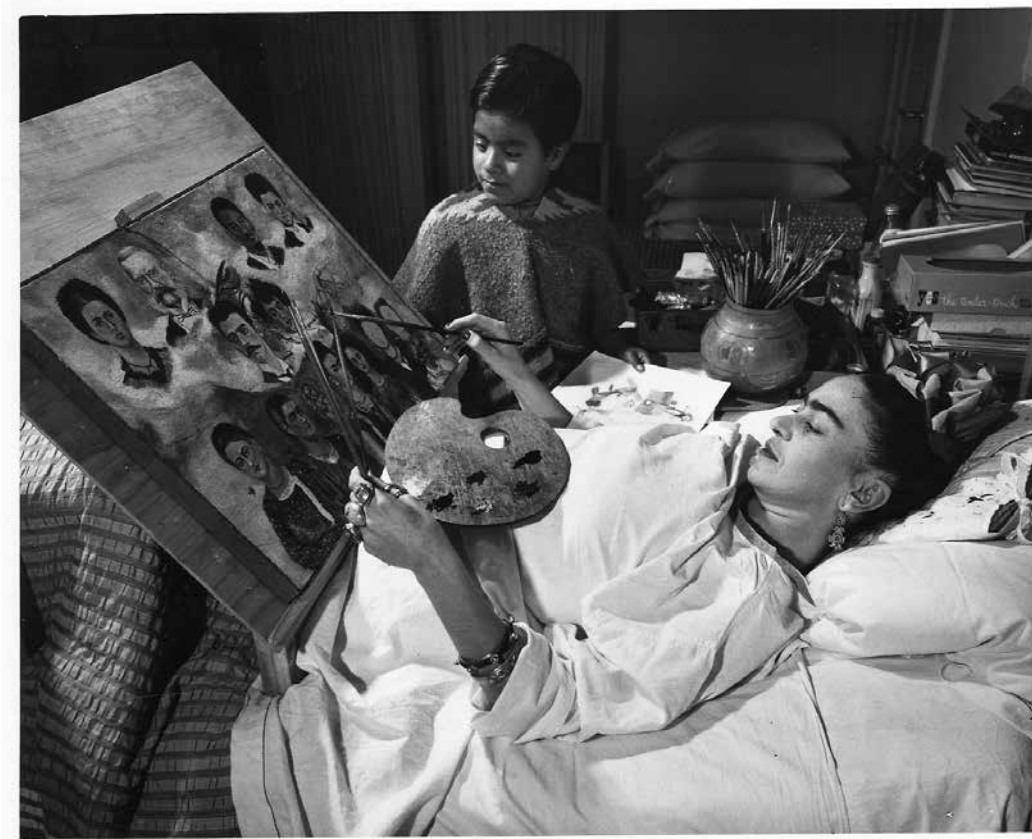
Despite her genuine zest for life and others, she is not loved by all, particularly my cousins Cassidy and Rebecca, though they would never dare say so out loud. You can just tell from their tight smiles, and questions about Alfrida's relationship status (single).

How like them, I thought, to toss aside Alfrida's wit and style and turn her teeth into a sorry problem.¹⁸

Alfrida's Observer on Interior

Inside my house are a few rooms. The house was originally built by my parents, 40 years ago, when they first got married. Now I live in it alone. I put an extension on the side of the house that adds to the master bedroom. The roof has been replaced one time. The furniture is mismatched to the style of the house and to itself. There are tables that were found on the sidewalk in D.C., a rug that my aunt wanted rid of, curtains that my grandmother made, a sofa that I saved up to buy, a desk and an armoire from my childhood bedroom, and other various pieces. When you arrive at the house, you walk in through the side door that leads from the drive way to the kitchen. The kitchen gets a lot of sun and has happy yellow walls. Through the archway in the kitchen is the living room which is very relaxed, and it overlooks the woods on the side of the house. This room also connects to the front porch, but no one ever enters through there. Finally, the bedroom is off the living room behind a closed door.

I tend to clean the kitchen the most, seeing that I have the most guests in the kitchen. Next, if there is time, I clean the living room, which mostly sees my friends. The bedroom falls behind and is only rarely cared for, but deeply lived in, the extension stuffed with clothes and objects. Every once in a while, if a close friend is over, I'll leave the door open, and they see the mess. I only went into the basement two times and I like to pretend it doesn't exist.



Frida Kahlo painting on her bed, 1932
From www.fridakahlo.org

Kahlo painted herself out of the room from which she was physically trapped. I paint the non-physical trappings of my interior.

Also Alfrida's Observer on Interior

Carl Jung had a dream about a house. In his dream, he enters into the house that he knows is his own and discovers different layers of truth as he moves from the top floor to the depths of the cellar. "As he descends the various layers of his house, he is descending the layers of his own psychology, psyche or soul."¹⁹ Jung's house is also a make-up of the mind. For him each floor becomes a deeper exploration as you go down. The top floor being your personal narrative, the ground floor being your family, the cellar being the culture with which you identify, and the cave being your ancestral line. But Jung is alone in his dream. He feels new to this place. My house looks more at levels of access. While the rooms do represent deeper and more personal compartments of my mind, they are not specifically categorized like Jung's. They are there as a guide to determine who can pass over the threshold and how far. Myself having barely ever made it to my own basement.

RACHEL



Chunky in Heat, 2018
Oil on canvas and newsprint
3'x 4'
From the artist

This work marks the beginning of my journey into short story.

Growing up I was a somewhat avid reader. I would pick the fattest books that I could find, because that meant a longer time spent in that world. Admittedly the other factor in choosing was the cover. I have always been a sucker for some juicy design. It wasn't until about a year ago when I read A.M Holmes's *Chunky in Heat* that I was really introduced to short story. That first one became an immediate obsession. The intrigue was originally based in my awe of some of the descriptors like "... dripping fat onto the lawn.", "...gurgling behind the glass.", and "...she lies immobile and swollen." but it became my love for the way that Holmes put me into skin. It was an account, neither positively nor negatively inclined. I picked the story up again for the 10th read, and suddenly Cheryl appeared. She had been there all along. Her name is printed 24 times throughout those 9 pages, and not once had I registered a name. This, I realized, was because I was her. When I read her story, I ignored third person in order to become first.

For a couple of years now I have been painting the same things again and again in my studio. These paintings of bodies inside of architectural spaces with themes of loneliness and solitude never tire me. Each time I produce another in the equation I am thinking about it in a slightly different way, trying to reach a solution. Around the time when I realized that I was having trouble giving that *Thing* a name, I started using characters to talk about my work. This was a way



Figure 14
“...something sticky there...”, 2019
Oil on Canvas
18”x 23”
From the artist

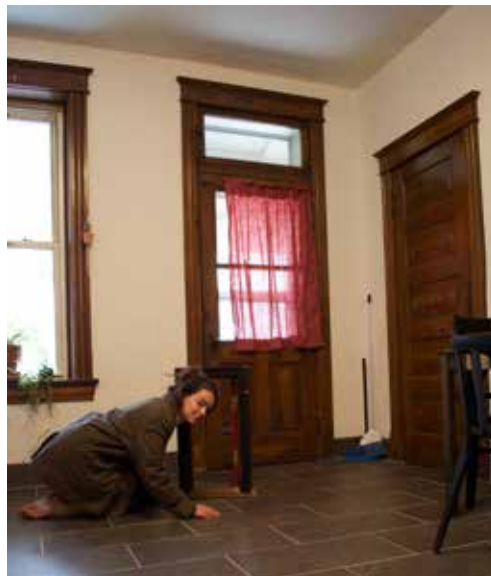


Figure 15
Process photo from the Airbnb

to escape from the pressure of being fully exposed, as well as, a way to work collaboratively with other women. The first character whose perspective I stepped into was Cheryl.

Looking at the paintings as short stories has helped me to talk about them. Short stories loosely have the following characteristics: brief and coherent, could be read in one sitting, drives home a single point or effect. Short stories usually play out in the parameters of one space. Certain details in these spaces become the focal point of the tale, in order to build a thick atmosphere of information, that then aids to the smaller plot. These methods make sense to me when decoding my own paintings. Specific moments, like the wood doors in, “...something sticky there...” (fig.14), suck you in and trap you in their space for a while, contending with the overwhelming ocean of yellow. Like a short story and like a set, these paintings end at their edges visually, but they create a vibration that appears like a ripple elsewhere. Considering a play, the set is only as real as is necessary to suspend disbelief. It is one of the only places where space is entirely an extension of the mind, no practical use, just imagination and visuals. The actors are only in their character when within that space, but that character is made of real material. That character is carried with the actor and also changed by the actor. That character will never exist outside the space of the collective mind.

In order to explore the common space that short story can create between an author and many readers, I asked a few friends of mine to come to an Airbnb that I booked for an evening. For each, I had them choose a character from a short story that they related too, and come dressed accordingly, both literally and metaphorically (fig.15). This was not about replicating the story. It was about

meeting in the middle of themselves, the character, the author, the space, and eventually myself. Within this Airbnb apartment, we worked together to fit their short story into the space using textures, themes, and architectural elements. Photographs were taken as a way to record research for a series of paintings. In the photographs, these women are themselves in costume posing in an Airbnb. Through painting, I bring all of the identities and characters together so that they can meet in their overlap. The paintings are the product of an understanding of the *Thing* amongst these women. Through our collaborative efforts, I hope to pinpoint that *Thing* that ties our experiences together.

The *Thing* isn't the man that follows you in the parking lot or the fact that you lost ownership over your body at an early age. The *Thing* is not that you are never heard or listened to or that your body is made to be your worth. The *Thing* is vast and thin, slipping into every crack. It is all of these things and everything in between. The more we attempt to name it, the closer we are to seeing it, to understanding it, and to overcoming it.

¹A.M. Homes, “Chunky in Heat,” in *The Safety of Objects* (New York, New York: The Penguin Group, 2013).

²Homes.

³“Microaggressions: More than Just Race,” Psychology Today, accessed November 28, 2018, <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/microaggressions-in-everyday-life/201011/microaggressions-more-just-race>.

⁴“Different Types of Trauma: Small ‘t’ versus Large ‘T,’” Psychology Today, accessed November 28, 2018, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/trauma-and-hope/201703/different-types-trauma-small-t-versus-large-t>.

⁵Carmen Maria Machado et al., *Her Body and Other Parties: Stories* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2017).

⁶Machado et al.

⁷Gaston Bachelard, “Shells,” in *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1994).

⁸Jane Bowles, *My Sister’s Hand in Mine: The Collected Works of Jane Bowles*, 2nd Noontday Press ed (New York: Noontday Press, 1995).

⁹Bowles.

¹⁰Robin Evans, *Translations from Drawing to Building* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1997).

¹¹Evans.

¹²Z. Z. Packer, *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2003).

¹³Packer.

¹⁴Morgan Parker, “‘Magical Negro’ Carries The Weight Of History,” NPR.org, accessed April 17, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/02/11/693587521/magical-negro-carries-the-weight-of-history>.

¹⁵Mary Gaitskill, *Bad Behavior*, 1st Vintage contemporaries ed (New York: Vintage Books, 1989).

¹⁶Gaitskill.

¹⁷Alice Munro, *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage: Stories* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf : Distributed by Random House, 2001).

¹⁸Munro.

¹⁹Stephen Farah, “Jung’s Dream House and Discovering Your Own Archetypal Home,” Appliedjung (blog), June 19, 2014, <https://appliedjung.com/jungs-dream-house/>.

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